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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000644

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: DAS BRYZA ENGAGES PRESIDENT ALIYEV ON  
JAILED BLOGGERS

REF: A. BAKU 594 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. BAKU 580

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu, Reasons 1.4b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During his August 12 visit to Azerbaijan, outgoing EUR DAS Matthew Bryza discussed the case of arrested youth group leaders Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade (reftel A) with President Aliyev. The President took a more positive tone in this discussion than he had previously with European interlocutors, describing the incident as a simple fight in a restaurant. Bryza relayed that the young men's supporters were interested in finding a way to de-escalate the situation, to which Aliyev and the Foreign Minister appeared interested. Earlier in the day, Bryza met with five family and friends of the two young men. Adnan's father, Hikmet Hajizade, asked Bryza to explain to President Aliyev that Aliyev's bureaucrats had misinformed him about the activities of the young men, and the family was ready to negotiate to find a peaceful solution to the detention. The other four young people, all activists in their own right, explained that the young men were not radicals, but were using the internet as a way to bring Western-educated young people together to talk about their country. They explained that cyberspace is the last space available for free expression in Azerbaijan, and the continued detention of these two men is causing young people to be afraid to use the internet to its fullest. End Summary.

Aliyev Leans Forward

[1](#)2. (C) In contrast to his troubling statement to the EU Presidency (reftel B), President Aliyev took a more positive tack in his August 12 discussion with EUR DAS Matthew Bryza. Rather than explain his need to defend the honor of the presidency, he told Bryza that this was a simple fight in a restaurant (as happens "20 to 40 times a day in Baku") and not a deliberate political act. Bryza told the President that he had met with family members of those detained as well as youth activists. He relayed that these supporters were interested in finding a way to de-escalate the situation. Aliyev and the Foreign Minister appeared interested in this suggestion.

[1](#)3. (C) The President continued that the case should be handled according to legal procedures. He emphasized that this was not political and that he did not even know the two youth activists, although he noted that he was aware that Emin Milli had organized a rally (against the constitutional

referendum abolishing limits to the number of presidential terms) outside the United Nations headquarters in New York. Bryza pointed out that Milli had translated for the President during a 2005 visit to Germany. The President said that he had heard this also, but did not remember Milli. Bryza added that, according to family and friends, the donkey video was not meant as an attack on the President, and that it was a misunderstanding by some of the President's staff.

#### Donkey Video Discussed

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14. (C) The President then asked pointedly whether the U.S. believed this incident was a response to the donkey video. Bryza responded that he was not in a position to judge this, not living in Azerbaijan, but that youth activists and family members certainly believed this. The President added that it seemed illogical that a group of seven people could be attacked by two assailants. But, prosecuting the two bloggers appeared like an attempt by the Azerbaijani Government to curb internet freedom. The Charge responded that according to photos in the newspapers, the two assailants were huge men with no necks, to which even the President laughed.

15. (C) The Charge added that in most countries, a fight in a restaurant would result in detention overnight and a release or fine. These two individuals are being charged with crimes that could result in 5-year prison terms. Should stiff prison sentences be handed down, it would seem to all to be a clear sign of political motivation. After a series of

BAKU 00000644 002 OF 003

complaints about criticism by the international media and former Secretary of State Rice, the President said that "minor episodes like this should not disturb our relations." He continued, "We will see what can be done. I myself am someone who supports young people and have just today agreed to send more students on exchanges to Germany."

#### Pre-Brief with Bloggers' Family and Friends

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16. (C) Before meeting President Aliyev, DAS Bryza met with five civil society activists closely involved with the Milli and Hajizade case. Hikmet Hajizade, father of Adnan Hajizade and former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Russia under ex-President Abulfaz Elchibey, explained that while hooliganism was the stated reason for his son's arrest, inside sources told him at first that the real reason was that the YouTube video of the donkey press conference "insulted the President." This apparently resulted from a misunderstanding of the German used in the video, which apparently made it sound as if one of the characters in the video addressed the donkey as "Mr. President." After this was explained in the press, Hajizade then heard a different justification: that the two men were really arrested to spread fear to all Western-educated youth in Azerbaijan. He asked Bryza to facilitate a negotiation between the family and the GOAJ, suggesting Bryza explain to President Aliyev that bureaucrats misinformed him about the young men's activities and that they should be released before more harm comes to Azerbaijan's international reputation.

17. (C) Ayten Qehremanli, an Oxfam employee who is a member of the AN Network, explained that since 1994 there has been a continuous shutdown of society, and there are now no alternative social formats for people to express themselves, other than the internet. Milli and Hajizade grabbed the opportunity provided by the internet and called other to exchange ideas in a spirit of tolerance. Erkin Gadirli, a lawyer and co-founder with Milli of the ReAL civic union, explained that Milli had worked for President Aliyev two years ago as an interpreter, but with recent events, Milli had become more outspoken on political issues. Gadirli explained that these online networks had no offices, no bank

accounts, and no real leaders -- nothing that the GOAJ could use to control them. Thus the arrests were the GOAJ's clumsy way to spread fear among the western-educated youth.

18. (C) Shahin Abbasov, deputy head of the IREX Media Program in Azerbaijan, agreed that the arrests were intended to intimidate these young people. He explained that Azerbaijan is a regional leader in the number of blogs and use of other online media, and the GOAJ is looking for ways to control this, as it does traditional media. He fears the GOAJ will take steps to shut down the internet next. He added that these arrests have successfully frightened young people into stopping their internet postings, and that only an unconditional release of the two men will change the situation. Furthermore, he pointed out that the arrests were not covered by any traditional media in Azerbaijan, and therefore 95 percent of the population does not know about them, despite the news being reported in the New York Times and other international outlets, from Fox News to Al Jazeera. Abbasov believes this is proof that the GOAJ's media control strategy has worked.

19. (C) Rashad Shirinov, a co-founder of the AN Network and employee of the National Democratic Institute, concluded the meeting by stating that the group had two tasks: the release of Milli and Hajizade, and reversing the long-term trend of shrinking political space. Shirinov believes there is a danger that Azerbaijan could lose its pro-Western orientation as it slips further into authoritarianism. He further explained that the people who read and watch the AN and Ol blogs and videos are the young, well-educated professionals who have a different vision for Azerbaijan's future and can bring change to Azerbaijan. Regular Azerbaijanis already believe that the West only cares about energy and security, but if these two men remain in jail, this group of young professionals will also believe this and will lose their faith in democracy and human rights.

BAKU 00000644 003 OF 003

COMMENT

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110. (C) The Embassy has been sending messages through the Foreign Ministry and the Presidential Apparat to ask the President to steer clear of making this an issue of defending the honor of the Presidency. It would appear that the President has at least modified his rhetoric on this issue. According to the German Ambassador, in a meeting with a senior German delegation the same morning, the President repeated these same assertions that this was a simple fight in a restaurant and said that he would make sure justice is done. Both this commitment and the statement to Bryza were more positive than the defensive tone taken with the EU Presidency, the British Minister for Europe and the OSCE Secretary General.

111. (C) Overall, the five civil society activists who met with DAS Bryza were clear in their definition of the problems with media in Azerbaijan, and clear in their requests from Bryza and the USG. This contrasts sharply with similar roundtables held in the past with older human rights advocates and opposition politicians, who often rant about past mistakes without a clear direction forward. This newer generation of activists is savvy about what is possible and what is not, and what the appropriate role for the international community is in the struggle to bring democracy to Azerbaijan.

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